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ABSTRACT

A classroom-based ethnographic study investigated the use of process writing techniques with English as a second language (ESL) writers. The primary purpose of the study was to establish a context where the strategies and methodologies that have been generated by the last 15 years of research on the composing process of native speakers could be used with ESL writers. Students in an ESL writing course (designed to prepare students for the standard introduction to composition course) at a New York community college were observed and interviewed for one semester, in a setting and context familiar and comfortable to them. Strategies and methodologies used included: free writing, peer writing groups, peer group discussions on grammar and syntax, teacher conferences, student choice of topics, rehearsal and invention strategies, emphasis on purpose and audience, and daily process journals. Findings indicated that not only are process strategies and techniques strongly indicated and recommended for ESL students, but also when used in secure, student-centered contexts, the benefits to these students can go far beyond their development as writers. The process oriented classroom enhances ESL students' audience awareness and self-esteem, as writers, as well as their awareness of the writing process and their willingness to revise. (An extensive list of references is appended.) (NKA)

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"THE ADULT ESL WRITER: THE PROCESS AND THE CONTEXT"

BY

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For several years, an increasing number of ESL researchers and practitioners have believed that ESL writers who are ready to compose and express their ideas can benefit from the use of strategies and methodologies similar to those suggested for use with native speakers of English (Zamel 1982, McKay 1981, Lay 1982). However, these holistic process strategies and methodologies have rarely been systematically utilized in the instruction of ESL writers.

One of the prime reasons for the resistance would have to be the underlying principles common to most current ESL instruction. While methodologically eclectic most ESL instruction today can be said to have the following characteristics:

1. It is heavily focused on instruction in grammar and syntax.
2. It is error-correction oriented.
3. It is product-centered.

The strong emphasis on the production of errorless "quality" written English is essentially one that focuses on the written product and not with the writing process itself, and it can probably be said that these characteristics differ from most writing instruction with native speakers of English only in degree.

However, another possible reason for the resistance to the use of process techniques with ESL writers might be that

teachers in the TESOL field (as teachers in most fields) are simply not attuned to pertinent pedagogical research that affects instruction. Duly, Burt, And Krashen (1982) have stated that "Most second language teaching methodology has developed without the benefit of research on second language learning. Most of what we now know about the way people learn languages has been discovered only in the last twenty years and many teaching methods are older than that." (p.8). There is much in the current research in second language acquisition that has begun to suggest the use of more holistic approaches that seem to be at the very least highly compatible with what process practitioners advocate. Current research findings from applied linguistics seem to indicate that second language acquisition (L2) is facilitated when the second language is used in a natural communicative context. Such research is clearly pointing toward the importance of what Krashen and Terrell (1983) term the "natural approach" in the acquisition of L2.

Krashen (1977, 1979), Brumfit and Johnson (1979) and Widdowson (1978), basing their theories on quantitative and descriptive studies such as those of Upshur (1968), Garnder, Smythe, Clement, and Gliksman (1976) and Oller (1977), have recently begun to focus on the importance of what has been termed "communicative competence" in L2 acquisition, a competence whose achievement is subconscious, a competence that is acquired through experience in active and real

communication that is of importance to the learner. This theory asserts that "acquisition of the second language will take place only to the extent that those students are exposed to and engaged in a contextually rich, genuine meaningful communication in that language" (Taylor, p.70). Taylor goes on to argue that the achievement of communicative competence necessitates a student-centered, communicatively-based approach to ESL instruction, one that begins with the student's communicative attempts in L2 rather than with the rules or structure of a target language. It is an approach that also emphasizes the importance of student-centered, secure learning environments which minimize teacher-centeredness.

Writing researchers have evolved a theory as well as a teaching paradigm which seem to be a natural response to these L2 research findings. It is a paradigm that sees writing as "The process of using language to discover meaning in experience and to communicate it....this process can be described, understood, and therefore learned." (Murray, p.73). From the classroom-based writing research have come techniques designed to have writing occur in real and communicatively-based classroom experiences, classroom experiences that by their nature create student-centered, secure learning environments which minimize teacher-centeredness. It then becomes clear that process classroom techniques are complementary to the research in second

language acquisition and not merely acceptable but strongly indicated for use with ESL writers.

In order to study the use of process techniques with ESL writers, a classroom-based research study was conducted using techniques from the field of enthnography. The study had a two-fold purpose. The first was to establish a context where the strategies and methodologies that have been generated out of the last fifteen years of research on the composing process of native speakers could be used with ESL writers.

Once that context was established, the second objective was to focus on the class as whole and several students in particular, preferably one peer writing group in the class, and to study their experience in such a writing context in order to add to our knowledge of ESL students as writers. Among the questions the study sought to answer during and after instruction were:

1. What effect can this classroom context have on L2 writers?
2. What was their response to the given classroom context?
3. What benefits can ESL students gain from the given classroom context?
4. What areas should L2 writing researchers focus on in the future?

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The course that was used for this study was an ESL writing course given at Hostos Community College Of CUNY. The subjects had an average of two years of formal instruction in ESL. The course was one designed to prepare ESL students for the college's standard Introduction to Composition course.

Using the work of Moffett (1968), Elbow (1973, 1980), Clifford (1981), Graves (1982), Murray (1982) and Calkins (1983) as the cornerstone, the first and primary activity was the establishment of a classroom environment conducive to the utilization of process techniques and strategies. Reflecting Hairston's (1982) emerging paradigm for the teaching of writing and the work of the above researchers and pedagogues, the following strategies and methodologies were utilized: free writing, peer writing groups, teacher conferences, student choice of topics within given parameters, readings and discussions based on the process, peer group discussions on grammar and syntax, group generated grading criteria for writing assignments, rehearsal and invention strategies, emphasis on purpose and audience, and daily process journals. The combination of procedures, methodologies and strategies were an effort to create a student-centered context for writing - the teaching of writing, and the learning of writing, a context that was based on communication and meaning. It was a context which sought to form a writing

community in which both the teacher and the students would engage the writing process, a context in which the roles of readers and writers would be interchangeable, a context which emphasized meaning and communication at the expense of error, and a context which sought to broaden the roles of the teacher to include that of "trusted adult".

For several years now, writing researchers have been using ethnographic methods and techniques to study the writing process of native speakers. The research methods include, analyze, study and consider critical the importance of context. Sociolinguists have long assumed that language becomes meaningful only in a social context (Hymes, 1977). Consequently, the context of writing can be seen as key to the development of elements needed for writing, among them a sense of audience, topics, and voice.

The methods and techniques of ethnography were used in this study of ESL writers with the intention of not only bringing to their study the current methods of the writing field but of also producing findings which would be of interest and accessible to classroom teachers. In order to gather data, ethnographic methods and techniques were used, including interviews with the selected students utilizing Spradley's (1979) ethnographic categories of questions, open-ended questionnaires, participant journals, researcher field notes, and the setting and inclusion of a context familiar and comfortable to the participants in this study.

In an effort to triangulate the data, they were collected from numerous perpectives. The data base was made up of the following:

1. Process journals - 40+ for each of the 25 students
2. Free writing - 50+ for the four selected students in the peer writing group.
3. Transcripts of four interviews for each of the four students in the peer writing group.
4. Transcripts of the four students in a peer writing group for the first seven weeks of the semester
5. Five formal writing assignments with drafts for each student.
6. Three in class writing assignments (plus drafts); in cludes an in-class writing on reaction to writing class
7. Two short open-ended questionnaires for each student.
8. One longer open-ended questionnaire for each student.
9. Biographical information sheet for each student
10. Writing sample taken the first day of class.
11. Previous semester's final exams for the four selected students.
12. My own log of the class

Having developed this context and data base, the data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glazer and Strauss, 1967).

Ethnographic studies focus on the generation of hypotheses and not on the generation of quantifiable results. The breakdown of the data generated six primary hypotheses. However, given that the study was conducted for just one thirteen-week semester with a limited number of subjects, the hypotheses should be viewed as all other hypotheses, as an invitation to further study.

HYPOTHESES

1. A student-centered process classroom which utilizes process strategies and techniques can promote the L2 writing development of adult first language literate ESL students who have had some exposure to formal L2 instruction. Within the process classroom constructed for this study, the data reveal that the subjects had developed into ESL writers who drafted regularly, who reflected over their process and were conscious of their strategies, writers who began with a plan which they increasingly saw as tentative and subject to change, whose writing at each stage seemed to be dictated by the representation of meaning to themselves and others.

This finding can be seen as important in light of the ESL writing pedagogies which for years have implied that the ESL students' lack of mastery over the target language necessitated approaches that focused on control and rigid guidance. These methods discouraged strategies which

emphasized writing as a meaning-making activity. Yet the limited English skills of the students in this study did not thwart their ability to develop into writers who more clearly fit profiles of experienced writers than student writers when compared to Birnbaum's (1982) profiles. By the end of the semester, the data clearly indicate that the ESL writers in this study were drafting, redrafting, revising and reading their writing to groups, rereading their writing and changing their writing. Within the given environment, they were actively engaging writing in ways which promoted meaning-making and discovery in spite of their level of English skills.

2. The treatment of error as a developmental element of the writing process and inherent in the construct of this study, can be a critical factor in the development of ESL writers. A process classroom which emphasizes meaning and communication at the expense of error is important to facilitate the engagement of writing as a meaning-making act, especially for ESL students whose previous instruction has conditioned them to believe that an errorless written L2 product should be their goal. This search for an errorless written product often makes ESL writers uncertain, tentative, and fearful of producing errors when they write in L2.

Perl (1979) has indicated that when writers emphasize editing for errors as they write, it interrupts the rhythms

generated by writing and thinking. The supportive writing environment constructed for this study, that is, one that viewed error in writing as part of the developmental L2 learning process and as a byproduct of the search for clear meaning, was an important part of the matrix for the development of writing as a means of discovery and communication evidenced by the ESL writers in this study.

3. The data also indicated that a student-centered process classroom which utilizes process strategies and techniques is a viable method to enhance the development of a sense of audience, an element of crucial importance to the writing process of ESL writers. While the data that reveal the value of a process classroom in promoting a sense of audience among writers is not surprising, the emergence of data that indicated the pivotal role it plays for the ESL writer is. The importance of audience for native speakers has been discussed continually in the writing field (Kantor 1984), Kroll 1984 etc.), but its role in the writing process of ESL writers has been almost totally overlooked. The data reveal that not only did the students benefit from the availability of expanded audiences for their writing, but also that this experience with multiple audiences proved to be a pivotal one for those ESL students unfamiliar with the dominant culture that is the ultimate audience for their writing.

The data indicated that a writing environment that emphasizes the social and communicative aspects of writing can serve to reduce the egocentrism of ESL writers and can facilitate the establishment of a sense of audience for their writing. However, the data also seem to suggest the presence of a kind of ethnocentrism among some ESL writers that may interfere with the development of a sense of audience. The classroom experience and supportive writing environment did serve to minimize that interference to some extent for most the students who evidenced such a problem. However the presence of such an element in the data seems to strongly indicate an additional variable in the writing process of ESL students, a variable whose presence could make the process of establishing audience a more difficult one for some ESL writers.

4. The establishment and development of a sense of audience within the given classroom construct can produce ESL writers who revise extensively and who develop revision patterns similar to those of experienced L1 writers.

Revision as a way of shaping and forming and discovering meaning has not been emphasized in current ESL writing pedogogies. Editing and correction are seen as revision by most of these pedogogies.

Within the construct of this study, the data indicate that most of the subjects developed into ESL writers who saw

revision as separate from editing; who saw the shape and form of their argument for their readers as a primary concern; who discovered meaning as they revised; who utilized all the revision strategies of deletion, substitution, addition and reordering at all levels of the text, word, phrase, sentence and theme. In short, they developed into writers who closely approximated the revision patterns of experienced L1 writers as described by Sommers (1980) in her 1980 study of revision.

This finding indicates the powerful effect that employing the strategies and techniques of the process approach to writing had on the writing development of the ESL writers in this study. It clearly indicates that providing the opportunity for ESL writers to engage writing as a meaning-making act, and supporting it with a variety of audiences that respond as readers, can result in ESL writers who revise for meaning and clarity and not merely edit for correctness.

5. The given classroom context and the use of process strategies and techniques can serve to increase the level of self confidence for ESL writers. Most current ESL writing instruction emphasizes form rather than content, placing the ESL learner in situations where failure to achieve perfection in the linguistic conventions of the target language is inevitable. This experience of failure often gives the

language learner an anticipation of failure and fear of rejection to the learning of a second language.

However, research has shown that a key element in the acquisition of a second language is the willingness on the part of the second language learner to risk new and unpredictable experiences and place themselves in genuine communicative situations. The data from this study suggest that providing a supportive writing environment and making available the process strategies and techniques which facilitate writing for meaning and communication can serve to minimize the fear of failure and increase the level of self confidence in ESL writers, thus providing a key element needed for overall second language acquisition.

6. Extensive writing opportunities for ESL writers can lead them to the discovery and experimentation with multiple functions of writing. Through engaging the writing process extensively and consistently during the semester, the subjects in this study began to discover uses for their writing that went beyond the incorporation of writing strategies and methods. They demonstrated that they could use their writing for a wide range of purposes. The students discovered how to use their writing as a means of doing and changing, of using their writing to develop their self confidence in English, of exploring their thinking about their first and second language processes. They also

demonstrated that they could use their writing as a means of knowing by using their writing to learn, to think about, and explore their world and their means of engaging that world.

What should not be overlooked in this finding is that the subjects were ESL students with inconsistent and variable English language skills. This finding points to a possible underestimation of what is possible with ESL writers at this level. The data indicate that the classroom constructed for this study provided the opportunity for these L2 students to develop into writers who could use writing itself to discover multiple functions of writing. They experienced writing in ways which served to fuse thinking, learning, and languaging through writing. The potential for this kind of a writing experience is one that cannot be overestimated

In short, if one had to sum up the hypotheses into one overriding message for teachers of ESL writers, it would have to be that not only are process strategies and techniques strongly indicated and recommended for ESL students, but also when used in secure, student-centered contexts, the benefits to these students can go beyond their development as writers.

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